



By Greg Bluestein
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ATLANTA - The only woman ever to die in Georgia's electric chair received a proper headstone Wednesday at a dedication ceremony more than 65 years later, marking what her supporters call a case of racial injustice in the Jim Crow-era South.

Lena Baker was a black maid executed in 1945 after being convicted in a one-day trial for killing a white man. Georgia corrections officials issued her a pardon in 2005 after six decades of lobbying and arguments by her family that she likely killed the man because he was holding her against her will.

Baker received a headstone noting she was executed in 1945 and pardoned 60 years later. The ceremony at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church in Cuthbert was attended by Baker's family, and organizers billed it as a cathartic experience as well as a reminder of racial injustice.

"This ordeal should not be forgotten," said Charles McElveen, Baker's great-great-nephew. "We need to remember where we came from so we don't end up back there. This lets people know the history of what went on here, from 1944 until now."

Jamey Crozier, an aid to U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Albany, read a statement at the ceremony, which he said the congressman would be reading into the Congressional Record later in the afternoon, The Albany Herald reported.

"Mr. Speaker, it is my hope that the dedication of her tombstone today can heal the wounds of the past. May Lena Baker now truly rest in peace," Crozier read.

The dedication ceremony comes amid renewed attention to Baker's plight. A DVD of the film "The Lena Baker Story," a feature film that documents the 44-year-old's life, was released this month. Director Ralph Wilcox said he's received a flood of e-mails and messages since the movie was released at a film festival in 2008.

"Before Martin Luther King Jr., before Rosa Parks, before Barack Obama, there was Lena Baker. There were people who inspire others to make changes and get called into action," said Wilcox, who also wrote and produced the film.

"She wasn't a medical doctor, a poet, a writer or a politician. She was an average woman trying to get along in the time when she lived."

Baker testified during her trial that E.B. Knight, who hired her as a maid, held her against her will and threatened to shoot her if she tried to leave. She said she grabbed Knight's gun and shot him when he raised a metal bar to strike her.

The jury of 12 white men didn't buy her self-defense argument, and her case wasn't helped when her court-appointed attorney didn't call a single defense witness. The jurors found her guilty of murder and the judge sentenced her to die.

Baker had maintained until her dying day that she shot Knight in self-defense, saying before the execution, "what I done, I did in self-defense. I have nothing against anyone."

At Baker's family's request, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles granted her a pardon in 2005. The board did not find her innocent of the crime, but instead found that the decision to deny her clemency in 1945 was "a grievous error, as this case called out for mercy."

An undertaker buried her body behind a small country church in Cuthbert, a southwest Georgia town where she attended services and was a member of the choir. Her grave remained unmarked for more than five decades, until the congregation spent \$250 a few years ago for a cement slab.

Still, her relatives and supporters wanted to mark her burial in a more fitting way, and they said the headstone unveiled Wednesday will serve as both a reminder and an inspiration.

"This site is an important landmark, an important piece of history," said Wilcox. "Hopefully it will help all of us continue to become better human beings, a memorial that people will recognize and honor to make sure that these types of things never happen again."